

## **City chosen for first charter school \*The new Times2 Charter School for Engineering, Math, Science, and Technology is expected to open with about 100 sixth-grade students in September 1998.**

[ALL Edition]

Providence Journal - Bulletin - Providence, R.I.

Author: GINA MACRIS Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

Date: Jun 22, 1997

Text Word Count: 1708

### **Document Text**

Two years after the General Assembly enacted charter school legislation, the state Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education has granted the first charter.

Officially it goes to the Providence school district, although the impetus comes from a private, nonprofit agency, Times2 (Times Squared), which for the last 16 years has been providing urban minority students with hands-on science and math after school and on weekends.

The new Times2 Charter School for Engineering, Math, Science, and Technology is expected to open with about 100 sixth-grade students in September 1998, possibly in a downtown office building. It will add one grade annually through Grade 12.

As a private agency, Times2 was not eligible to apply independently to the Regents for a charter.

Applicants must be existing public schools, school districts or "groups of public school personnel," according to Rhode Island's law. Of 26 charter school laws in the nation, Rhode Island's is the only one that excludes private nonprofit agencies.

Ralph Taylor, executive director of Times2, called the law "very confining."

But "I would much rather see the opportunity for our children . . . to start out this way rather than wait until the law changes," he said.

"I want to live and share the experience from the inside rather than point my finger and throw stones," he said.

"We're going to have to report to the Providence school committee versus being a separate governing unit," he said. The relationship between Times2 and the school district will be formalized in a legal contract, he said.

PERHAPS THE biggest hurdle Times2 faces in the next year is a lack of public funds for start-up costs. Taylor notes that neighboring Massachusetts provides \$50,000 in seed money for each new charter school.

As a public school, Times2 will be eligible to recoup up to 70 percent of construction costs from the state. The state reimbursement would go to the municipality, leaving the School Board and Times2 to work out the rest.

The most probable site for the new school is a six-story office building at Union and Weybosset Streets that

needs about \$1.5 million worth of renovations and another \$500,000 for furnishings.

The agency is entertaining two other ideas, one involving modular construction and the other based on a domed building. But Times2 has no land to build on and has not yet worked up any construction estimates for either of those proposals, Taylor said.

He said a site will be chosen by September, allowing a full year for construction.

The downtown site has the advantage of giving students easy access to mentors in business and higher education. Within walking distance are both the University of Rhode Island and Johnson & Wales University.

"We know that the business and education partnership . . . is truly one of the keys to success in urban school districts," Taylor said.

He said the existing after-school and weekend program, which reaches a total of 400 minority students a year in Providence and Newport, will continue. Last year, Times2 received the President's Service Award, the highest honor bestowed by President Clinton for volunteerism. Out of 3,200 nominations, only 20 were chosen.

With 17 employees, most of whom work part time, and scores of volunteers, Times2 offers a wide array of field trips and workshops, as well as personal attention for individual students from math and science professionals.

The new secondary school will aim to intensify the work of the after-school and weekend program, Taylor said.

THE 1995 charter school legislation appears headed for a slight adjustment in the General Assembly with an amendment that would allow nonprofit agencies to apply for charters in conjunction with public school districts.

The amendment, which has the backing of Governor Almond, has cleared the House and is now before the Senate.

Another proposal that would have given nonprofit groups the autonomy to approach the Regents independently is no longer viable, an apparent victim of objections from teachers unions and the Rhode Island Association of School Committees, according to Stephanie Sullivan, policy adviser to Almond.

Its chief proponent was John F. Ward, a School Committee member in Woonsocket who says he has opposed a charter school proposal emanating from that city chiefly because of the restrictive nature of the law.

So far, the Woonsocket proposal has only conditional approval from the Regents, who have asked for details on academic programs.

Ward maintained the law perpetuates a slow, bureaucratic process with inherent barriers that protect vested interests rather than providing an impetus toward change. .

He also said it sets up school committees and teachers unions for too many political conflicts.

On that point, public school teachers from the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy in Providence might

agree with him.

The academy, which has developed liaisons with business to turn around troubled students, has won national recognition from Business Week magazine and the Small Business Administration since it opened in 1994.

Peter J. McWalters, the commissioner of elementary and secondary education, says a charter proposal written by teachers at the academy is "the strongest" of several that have come before the Regents.

But final approval has been elusive, hung up over the issue of the principal, who was not consulted in the design of the charter school. McWalters said a charter should not be used "to carve out one person."

Providence School Supt. Arthur M. Zarrella, has said publicly that the problem will be resolved with the transfer of the principal, who wants another post.

But McWalters said the Regents have not been informed of any resolution.

The School Board, meanwhile, has withheld support, with one member questioning the legality of the legislature allowing a charter to remove an existing public school from the local board's control.

"We've given that question to all the lawyers," McWalters said, and they all agree that the charter legislation falls well within the General Assembly's broad charge to promote education.

McWalters predicted that the Academy will receive final approval soon, possibly at the Regents' next meeting on Thursday. If so, it would become the first charter school in actual operation.

RHODE ISLAND'S charter school law is "one of the best" in terms of "accountability to taxpayers," says Marcia Reback, president of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers, one of two unions representing public school teachers.

By requiring that charter schools employ public school teachers certified by the state, parents are assured that their children will be taught by people who know child development and the psychology of learning in addition to their academic disciplines, she said.

"The romantic notion that anyone can teach, I think, is dangerous," she said.

Dan Corley, head of the private Community Preparatory School in South Providence, says Rhode Island has a "horrible law."

Corley helped draft the charter school bill, which he said was "watered down" before the final version was enacted in 1995.

Corley employs some teachers who are certified by the state to teach in public schools and some who are not. His school has a reputation for nurturing academic excellence in a racially diverse student body spanning grades four through eight.

"I would challenge any educator to walk through our corridors, or those of Moses Brown, Lincoln, or Wheeler, and pick out the teachers who are certified," he said.

State certification does not assure quality control, except "at the very entry point," Corley said.

He said private independent schools are able to be "much stronger schools because we have the ability to go after the best person," certification aside. Reback said the question of teacher certification is subsidiary to the issue of "whether taxpayer dollars should be utilized to support what are essentially private schools."

The existing charter law allows for innovation through negotiated waivers to every aspect of teachers' contracts except salaries, benefits, and grievance procedure, Reback said.

In other states, where private organizations are permitted to apply for charters, "there's no accountability," Reback maintained.

"Self-selected governance boards are given money that should otherwise go into the public school system. There are now charters being pulled for malfeasance or other crimes," she said.

McWalters said he does not believe charters should be tantamount to "vouchers," setting up an array of choices and allowing students to go wherever they can get what they want.

"Those parents who have the resources to get their kids where they want them have already done that" by simply moving into the communities of their choice, he said.

McWalters said his job is bringing choice and high academic standards to students who don't have the advantages.

"Charters are useful if we're trying to empower or authorize groups of professionals to (teach) differently," he said. "Charters have that kind of limited purpose."

"I have the authority through the school system to ask for equal access to (charter) programs," he said.

McWalters said that allowing private nonprofit organizations to apply "doesn't address the equal access" issue.

He says he sees charters as a good "vehicle for public school teachers."

"I don't believe we should be certifying programming with a whole lot of uncertified people in it," he said, but there is room to broaden the current system of certification to include practicing professionals, "where I know my craft and you can help me acquire the pedagogy of instruction."

Such a "performance-based" system of certification would allow an entity like Trinity Square Repertory Company or a museum to sponsor a public school, McWalters said.

"I just don't think it's as simple as letting any group . . . run a school," he said.

CORLEY, on the other hand, maintained it is almost that simple.

"If money followed a child to a public school, that is quality control," he said.

"It's day-to-day customer satisfaction, giving parents what they really deserve; the power to determine their child's education.

"They say the poor can't make those choices," Corley said, but "most people who say that are living in a suburban town. "

"But I live in the Elmwood neighborhood" on the South side of Providence, Corley said.

"People on my street should be allowed to make good choices around their children's education, and they will make good choices in almost every case.

"They will become educated on how to advocate for their children and their children's future. What they need is a level playing field," he said.

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